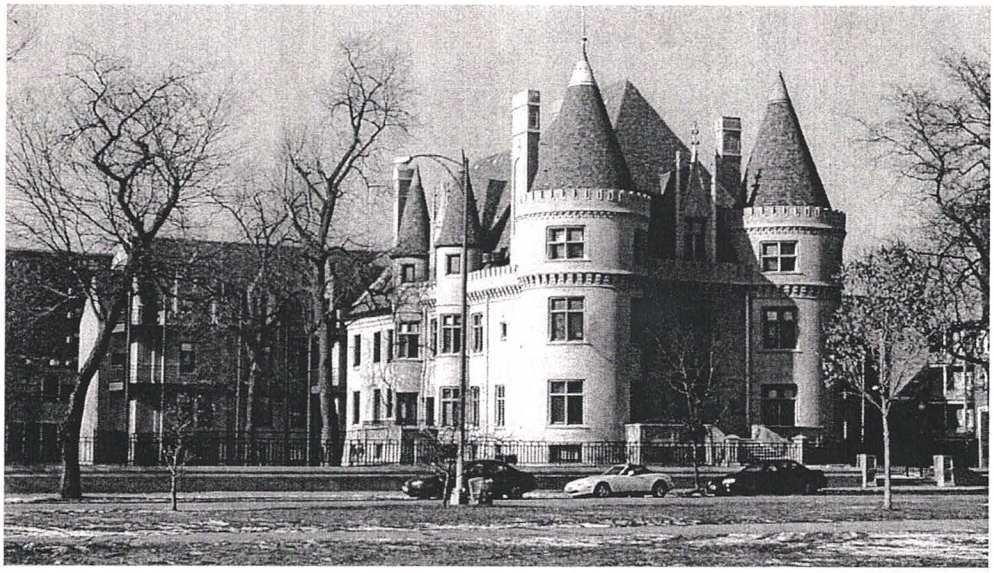
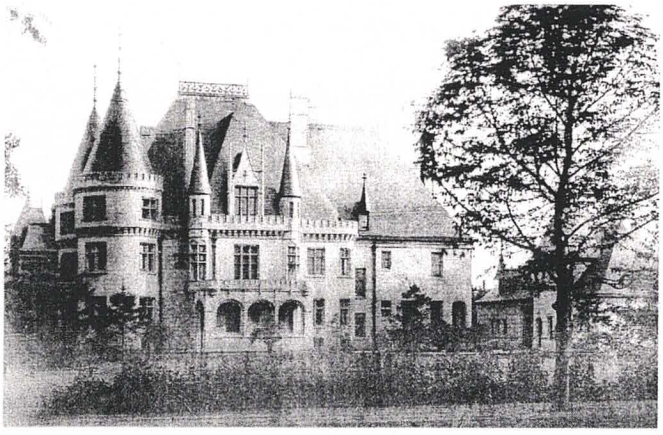
LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT





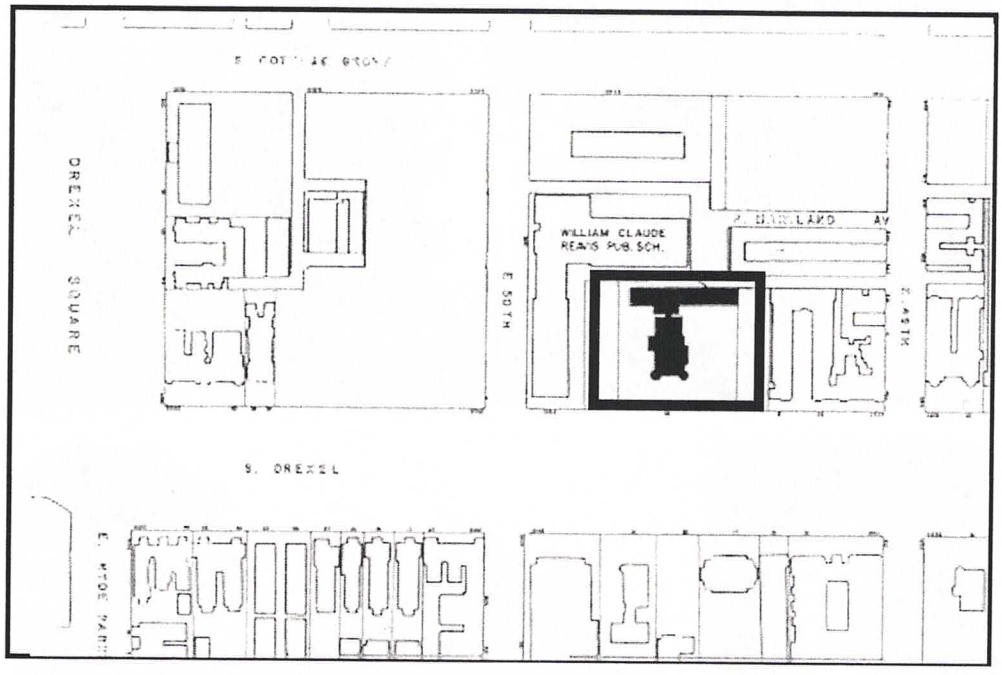
McGill House

4938 S. Drexel Boulevard

Preliminary Landmark recommendation approved by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, May 4, 2005

CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Lori T. Healey, Commissioner



Above: The McGill House, located at 4938 S. Drexel Boulevard, is prominently sited on the boulevard between 49th and 50th Streets. (The property traditionally associated with the McGill House is outlined in bold on the map.)

Cover: (Top) The massively-scaled McGill House was constructed in 1891 and its rear wing was added in 1928. (Bottom left) Henry Ives Cobb architect of the McGill House. (Bottom right) The McGill House seen shortly after its completion in 1892.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and the City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

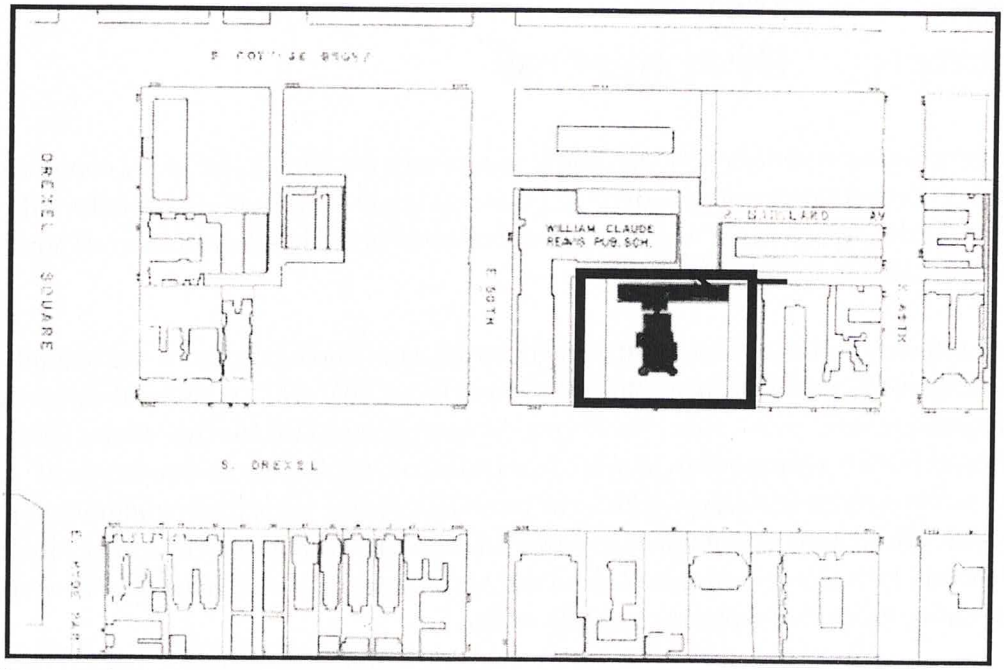
McGill House
4938 South Drexel Boulevard

Built: 1891
Architect: Henry Ives Cobb

One of the grandest mansions in the Kenwood community, the McGill House is a commanding presence on Drexel Boulevard, one of Chicago's most impressive South-Side boulevards. The massively-scaled "picturesque" mansion was constructed in 1891 as the residence of physician and entrepreneur Dr. John A. McGill.

Drawing inspiration from medieval and French Renaissance building traditions, the McGill House, designed by nationally noted architect Henry Ives Cobb, is an exceptional early example of Châteauesque-style architecture. Following the completion of the McGill House, Cobb was instrumental in the planning of the campus of the University of Chicago and the design of eighteen of the campus's striking Gothic structures in the nearby Hyde Park neighborhood. Cobb's skillful execution of traditional designs made him an outstanding architect in Chicago during the late 19th century and earned him a national reputation as one of the premier architects working during this period in historic revivalist styles.

Upon its completion, the McGill House was highly regarded by architecture critics of the day, including C.E. Jenkins of the *Inland Architect,* who described the residence as "most dignified and beautiful." Its dramatic visual character, massive scale, and prominent location on Drexel Boulevard has made the McGill House a unique visual landmark on the City's South Side for over a century.



Top: The massively-scaled McGill House is shown here in 2003. Constructed in 1891, the McGill House is an exceptional example of Chateauesque-style architecture, based on 16th-century French architecture. (The rear wing was added in a compatible style in 1928 while the house was in use as a Y.W.C.A.)

Bottom: The McGill House, located at 4938 S. Drexel Boulevard, is prominently sited on the boulevard between 49th and 50th Streets. (The property traditionally associated with the McGill House is outlined in bold on the map.)

The McGill House and Drexel Boulevard

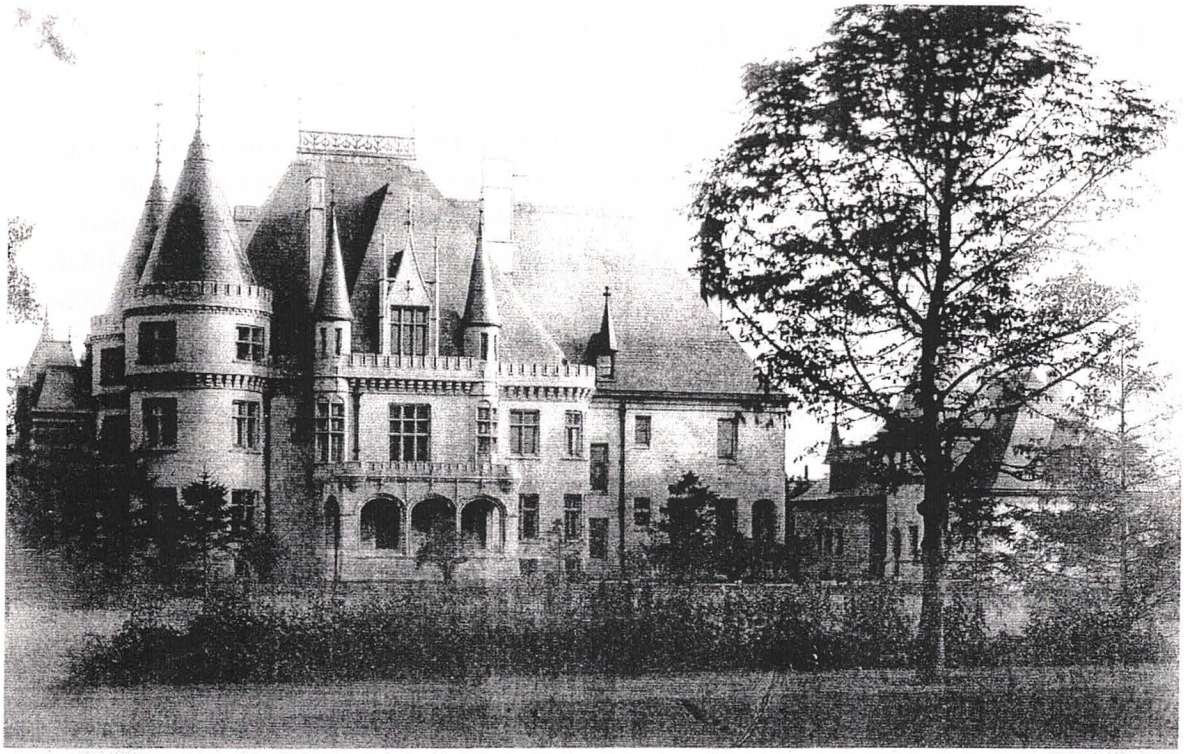
The McGill House was constructed in 1891 for physician Dr. John A. McGill (1842-1924). A native of Toronto, Dr. McGill's ancestors immigrated from Glasgow, Scotland to Montreal where they amassed great wealth in the fur trade and emerged as prominent philanthropists establishing McGill University in Montreal. At the time of his house's construction, Dr. McGill was an innovator in the manufacture of patent medicine. Throughout his life, McGill maintained close ties to Chicago's Scottish community through his philanthropic works.

In 1890, construction of the McGill House began on a large lot on South Drexel Boulevard, one of the most prestigious residential avenues on Chicago's South Side, which ran along the western edge of the Kenwood neighborhood. Originally a railroad suburb, Kenwood was one of the City's most exclusive neighborhoods by the end of the 19th century, and Drexel Boulevard was the location of many extravagant mansions. Today, the McGill House is one of the finest residences on Drexel Boulevard to survive from this era.

The origins of the Kenwood community date to 1856, when Dr. John A. Kennicott constructed a home in the area near 43rd Street and the Illinois Central railroad. Kennicott envisioned a suburb of large homes on spacious lots, and within twenty years his vision came true. In 1859, the Illinois Central opened the Kenwood station at 47th Street, and by 1860 several Illinois Central executives settled in the new suburb of grand residences and elegant grounds. The creation of Drexel Boulevard and nearby Washington Park in 1869, combined with the Chicago Fire of 1871, spurred development in the area, and by 1874 Kenwood became known as the "Lake Forest of the South Side."

Kenwood's prestige grew with the creation of a system of public parks and boulevards by the South Park Commission. The sons of Philadelphia banker, Francis A. Drexel, deeded Drexel Boulevard to the South Park Commissioners and erected a statue honoring their father at the corner of Drexel and 51st Street. Their lots, on both sides of the wide boulevard, were purchased by wealthy Chicagoans, many of whom had businesses in the nearby stockyards. Stately residences, mansions, institutional, and religious buildings lined the wide, handsomely landscaped boulevard that featured a park-like medians flanking a carriageway. From the time of its annexation to the City in 1889 through the 1920s, Kenwood remained an exclusive residential enclave.

The grandly-scaled McGill House exemplifies the opulent Châteauesque style of architecture, based on lavishly-scaled 16th-century French Renaissance architecture and rarely found in Chicago. Constructed of smooth-faced gray Bedford limestone, the three- and one-half story residential building resembles a late medieval French castle with its commanding central entrance flanked by identical massive three-story round corner towers, which are in turn topped with conical roofs and copper finials. The finely-crafted decorative stonework includes delicate carved foliate ornament surrounding the semicircular arched main entry and crenelated belt coursing between the second and third stories.

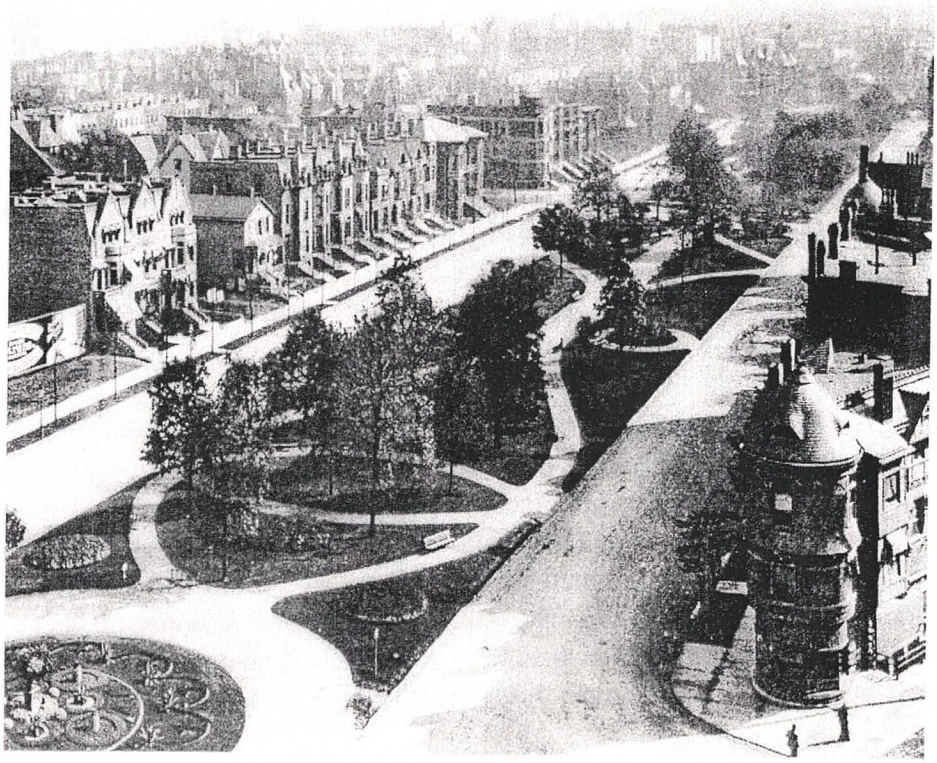


RESIDENCE OF DR. J. A. McGILL, CHICAGO.

HENRY IVES COBB, ARCHITECT.

Above: A view of the McGill House from *Inland Architect and News Record*, 1892.

Right: Drexel Boulevard from 40th Street. At 100 feet wide, Drexel Boulevard connected Oakland Boulevard on the north with Washington Park to the south, combining park amenities park with the formal landscaping of a grand boulevard.



Massachusetts, and attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. He worked for the Boston-based firm of Peabody & Stearns until 1881 when he left the firm and moved to Chicago after winning a competition to design the Union Club house (southwest corner of Delaware and Dearborn streets; now demolished).

Cobb soon formed a partnership with Charles S. Frost, another architect formerly with Peabody & Stearns. Cobb & Frost is best remembered for one of its earliest commissions, the "million-dollar mansion" for Potter Palmer (built 1882-85), which resembled a Norman castle and stood—it has since been demolished—on Lake Shore Drive between Banks and Schiller streets. The firm also designed commercial buildings and other large residences—including the Cable House (1885; 25 E. Erie St.; a designated Chicago Landmark)—before the partnership was dissolved in 1888 and Cobb established an independent practice.

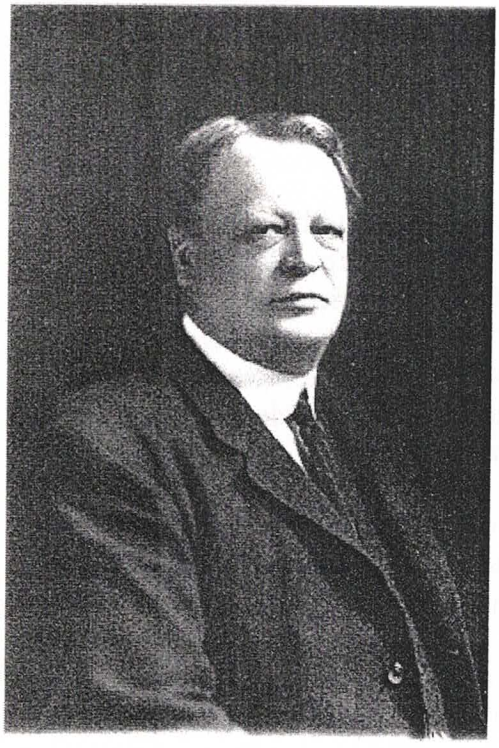
Like the McGill House, most of Cobb's designs are distinguished examples of historically derived architecture. Many of the buildings of Cobb's day were based loosely on historical styles of architecture, but the precise detailing of his buildings made them of significantly higher caliber than others. His notable works include the:

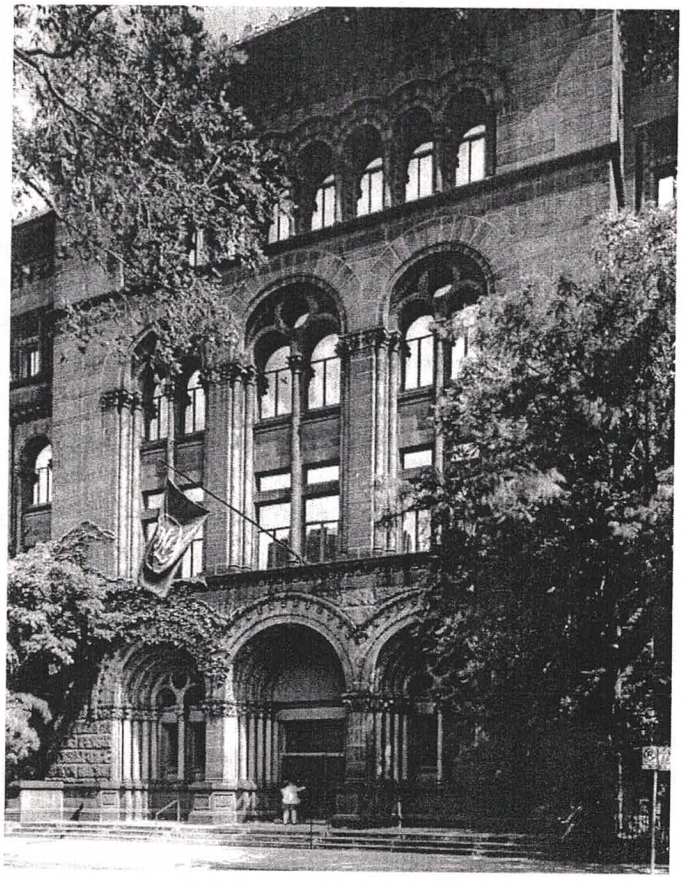
- eighteen English Gothic-inspired campus buildings for the University of Chicago (1891-1900);
- Chicago Athletic Club (1893; 12 S. Michigan Ave.), designed in the Venetian Gothic style;
- Chicago Varnish Company Building (1895; 33 W. Kinzie St.), designed in the Dutch Renaissance Revival style;
- several buildings at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, including the Fisheries Building, based on eighth-century Romanesque architecture, and an accurate rendition of Northern Indian architecture for the India Pavilion; and
- the Richardsonian Romanesque-style Newberry Library (1888-92; 60 W. Walton St.) and the former Chicago Historical Society (1892-96; 632 N. Dearborn St.), both designated Chicago Landmarks.

The prominence of Cobb's clients is evidence of his success. Cobb was an architect who, without being completely literal, convincingly adapted European styles to the American urban environment. Daniel Bluestone in his 1991 book, *Constructing Chicago*, described Cobb as "experienced at linking cultural concerns and architectural forms."

In his day Henry Ives Cobb was considered one of the best and most distinguished architects in Chicago. Quoting the famed architecture critic of the 1890s, Montgomery Schuyler:

> [T]he architect has reached a personal expression within the limits of an historical style, and has given evidence of an artistic individuality in addition to the abundant testimony given in his work to a remarkable technical equipment and a really astonishing versatility and facility.

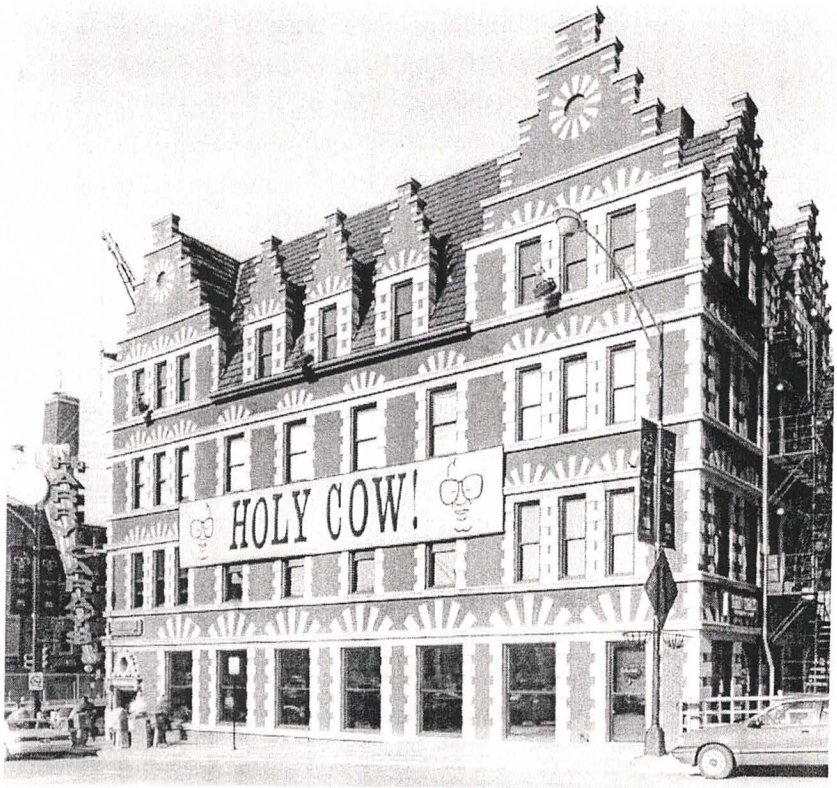




Top (left): Henry Ives Cobb is widely regarded as one of the premier architects nationally working at the turn of the last century in historic revival styles.

Top (right): Cobb designed the Richardsonian Romanesque-style Newberry Library (1888-92) located at 60 W. Walton Street (designated as part of the Washington Square District).

Left: The Chicago Varnish Co. Building (1895) was designed by Cobb in the Dutch Renaissance Revival style. It was designated a Chicago Landmark in 2001.



This excerpt appeared in an issue of the national publication *Architectural Record* devoted to three Chicago firms: Alder & Sullivan, D.H. Burnham & Co., and Henry Ives Cobb. This grouping is its own measure of the high esteem in which Cobb was held during his career. But as fast as his star rose, his practice rapidly declined. The financial panic of 1893 and the ensuing depression curtailed new construction, affecting Cobb and other architects. Subsequently, Cobb and his historicist architecture fell out of favor, as historians viewed the works of Louis Sullivan (of Alder & Sullivan) and John Root (Daniel Burnham's partner) as the prelude to Modernism.

In 1898, Cobb moved to Washington, D.C. on the promise, apparently unrealized, of a major commission for American University. Four years later he moved to New York, where he designed several notable buildings, including the Liberty Building (1909-10), a neo-Gothic skyscraper which the *Guide to New York City Landmarks* refers to as "an important precedent to the Woolworth Building." At the time of its construction Liberty Tower was called "the tallest building in the world on so small an area of ground."

Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect. 2 120 620 and 630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, object, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the McGill House be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- The McGill House is a premier example of a massively-scaled residence in the Châteauesque style, featuring heavy masonry construction, a steeply-pitched hipped roof displaying a lively roofline of turrets, gables and chimneys, and picturesque corner towers with conical roofs.

- The Chateauesque style is a rare style in Chicago, based on medieval and Renaissance buildings in France, especially the *chateaux*, or country palaces, found in central France.

- The McGill House is a distinctive and exceptional building exhibiting fine craftsmanship, detailing, and use of materials, including limestone and metal.

Criterion 5: Important Architect

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- Henry Ives Cobb was an important architect of both local and national reputation. In Chicago, he won many prestigious commissions, such as the campus plan and several buildings for the University of Chicago; the Chicago Athletic Club; the Newberry Library; the former Chicago Historical Society Building; and the Chicago Varnish Company Building.

- Cobb's talent was recognized in his time. A lengthy essay written in 1896 by the most prominent critic of the time, Montgomery Schuyler, favorably discuses Cobb's work in comparison with that of two other important architecture offices, Adler & Sullivan and D.H. Burnham & Co.

- As illustrated by the McGill House, Henry Ives Cobb was most interested in historical and eclectic styles based on historic European architecture. He designed the elegant mansion in an opulent style featuring precise detailing that made his buildings of significantly higher caliber than others.

Criterion 7: Unique Visual Feature

Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.

- Prominently located on Drexel Boulevard, the dramatic roofline, massive form, and French-inspired elegance of the McGill House has been a visual landmark of the South Side of Chicago for over a century.

Integrity Criterion

Its integrity is preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic, community, architectural, or aesthetic interest or value.

The McGill House looks much the same as it did when it was completed in 1891. Minor alterations have occurred throughout the building, including the replacement of windows and doors and the enclosure of the porte-cochere located on the north side of the building. In 1928 a three-story addition was constructed at the rear of the McGill House. Respectfully set back from the main residence, the addition was built in a simplified version of the Châteauesque style and does not dominate the prominent character of the McGill House.

Recognized for its architectural significance, the McGill House has been featured in publications including *AIA Guide to Chicago*, *Chicago Homes: Facts and Fables* and *Hyde Park Houses*. Additionally, the McGill House was identified as architecturally significant by the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its preliminary evaluation of the McGill House, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- all exterior elevations of the building, including rooflines, visible from public rights-of-way, and
- the adjacent land historically associated with the McGill House.

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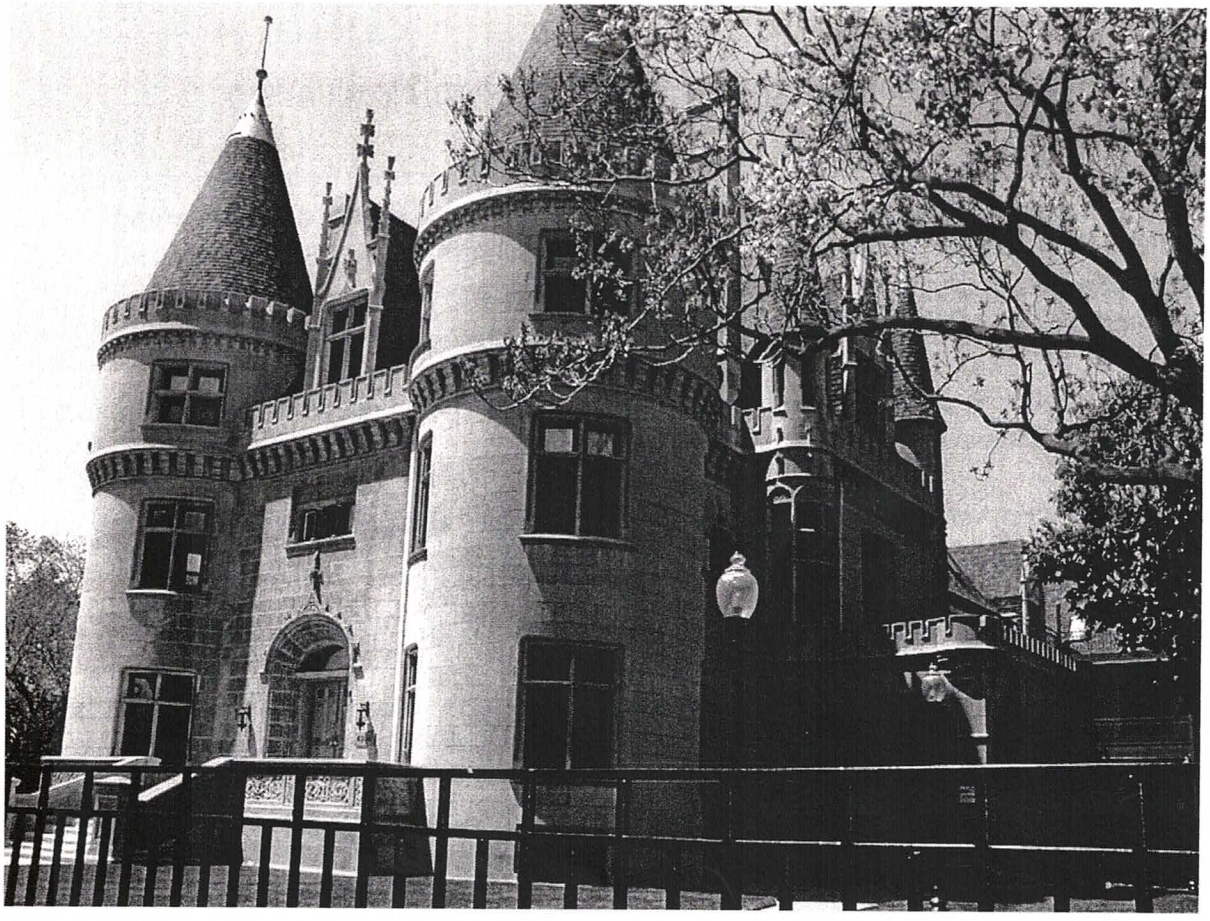
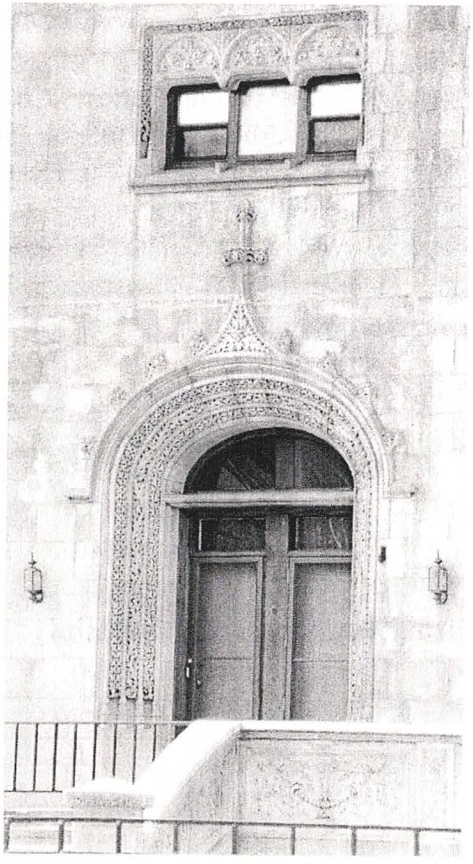


Top: The McGill House is shown above in May 2002.

Right: Finely-crafted decorative stonework including delicate carved foliate ornament surrounds the semi-circular main entry of the McGill House.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Illustrations
Department of Planning and Development: p. 2 (top).
Department of Maps and Plats: p. 2 (bottom).
From *Inland Architect and News Record* v. XX, no.1 (August, 1892): p. 4 (top).
From *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis*: p. 4 (bottom).
From *A Field Guide to American Houses*: p.6 (top).
Steve Beal: p. 6 (bottom).
From *University of Chicago Magazine* 69 (Spring 1977): p. 8 (top left).
Bob Thall: p. 8 (top right and bottom).
Department of Planning and Development: p. 10.

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